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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LILONGWE 000175

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SUBJECT: MALAWI: NORTHERN REGION NO LOCK FOR PRESIDENT

REF: LILONGWE 44

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Classified By: Political Officer John Letvin for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Malawi's Northern Region looks to be a key swing district in May 2009 elections, where its 14% share of the national electorate could be a major factor. Key issues for Northerners are economic development, representation in the national government and an end to discriminatory policies such as a proposed quota system for university entrance. The most influential organization in the North remains the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) - Livingstonia Synod. Synod members are deeply disappointed in Mutharika's choice of Joyce Banda as his running mate over Minister of Finance (and Northerner) Goodall Gondwe. Many northern leaders, including Mutharika's own party leadership in the region, viewed the selection as a betrayal. Rev. Nyondo said the VP selection, along with the quota system, should be enough to turn Northern votes away from Mutharika toward rival John Tembo in the presidential race. Inadequate regional development is also likely cost most Parliamentary incumbents their seats (25 of 33 are from Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party). The region may elect a record number of independent parliamentary candidates. End Summary.

North is Malawi's Swing State

¶2. (SBU) The Northern Region was once dominated by the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), which swept all 33 Parliamentary seats in 1999. Due to the death of the party's leader and an ill-advised alliance with former President Muluzi's United Democratic Front (UDF), AFORD captured only six seats in ¶2004. The remaining seats were split among seven parties and numerous independents. After defecting from the UDF in early 2005, President Mutharika successfully wooed 22 Northern region MPs and captured three more Northern seats in December 2005 by-elections. While the Northern region accounts for only 14% of the registered voters in Malawi, in an anticipated tight race this year, Northern voters hope they can play kingmaker in the May elections.

¶3. (C) Because the President controlled 25 of the 33 seats for the past four years, many associate the North with Mutharika's Democratic Progress Party (DPP). However, a resurgent AFORD, the newly formed New Rainbow Coalition (NARC) party, and a record number of independents threaten to disrupt the DPP's hold on the North this May. All 33 constituencies will be hotly contested. Perhaps none more so than Mzuzu city, the regional seat, where 12 candidates representing all participating parties and several independents will vie for the seat. Despite the numerous small parties with roots in the North, individual candidates will matter far more than their party colors in this year's

elections.

China Switch Slows Development

14. (C) Development, or the lack of it, has historically been the biggest issue for voters in the North. Despite President Mutharika's claims of improvements, the Forum for New Development (FOND), a Northern region pressure group, cited lagging road construction, poor quality health care systems, and the declining state of schools as contrary evidence. The December 2007 change of recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China noticeably affected the North, where the Taiwanese had staffed the main hospital and were constructing a new paved road from Karonga to Chitipa. Since the change, the road project has languished, only recently restarting. Moreover, many Northerners complain that the new Chinese doctors are unable to speak adequate English and a lack of translators is reducing the quality of care at Mzuzu Hospital.

Disappointment over Bingu Veep Choice

15. (C) According to many Northern leaders, the voters want to see a Northerner as vice-president to help advance the development agenda. After 30 years of dictatorship under Kamuzu Banda, who hailed from the Central region, multi-party democracy has shifted the Presidency to the South. In an effort to reach out, Mutharika's DPP leadership met with Rev. Levi Nyondo (leader of the CCAP-Livingstonia Synod, the largest and most influential religious body in the North) repeatedly in recent months regarding the selection of a vice-president. According to former DPP Northern Region Governor Harry Mkandawire, the Synod saw respected Minister

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of Finance Goodall Gondwe as the new torchbearer for the region. Mkandawire told emboff that in the discussions, the DPP initially promised Nyondo and other Northern leaders that Gondwe would be Mutharika's vice-presidential pick. When he ultimately changed his mind and selected fellow Southerner Joyce Banda as his running mate, the North viewed it as a betrayal. Support for Mutharika, even among DPP leadership in the North, has since plunged.

16. (C) Former Attorney General Ralph Kasambara told emboff that after the Banda selection became clear, Malawi Congress Party presidential candidate John Tembo attempted to take advantage, setting up a meeting with Rev. Nyondo. Kasambara said Tembo offered to take Deputy Minister of Education Richard Msowoya, a Northerner, as his running mate if the Synod would support him. While the move ultimately failed due to a lack of support from the rival Nkhoma Synod, Tembo's attempt may have won some favor. Rev. Nyondo told the Ambassador that it was likely Tembo would now take the majority presidential vote in the North. He said there would also be some support in the North for NARC presidential candidate Loveness Gondwe, who has been outspoken on development issues in Parliament. Rev. Nyondo explained to the Ambassador that the North needed a coalition of MPs who would look after the region's interests. FOND Secretary General Dr. Godwin Mkamanga told the Ambassador that the group had tried to help form such coalition but DPP parliamentarians had refused to participate.

Quota System Irks

17. (C) A proposed quota system for the university system in Malawi remains the most contentious issue for Northerners. The Mutharika government proposed a system of university admissions that is proportional to population. The North, at only 12% of the national population, currently supplies far more than its share of qualified university students each year due to a legacy of stronger education by missionaries

there. While the government has thus far delayed the implementation, President Mutharika told Rev. Nyondo in a fit of pique that he would implement the system after the elections. Rev. Nyondo told the Ambassador that the Synod would vigorously fight the issue and that it will cost the DPP significant votes in the North. Mkandawire admitted that the issue was bigger than party politics and suggested that he would advocate for Northern DPP parliamentarians to "cross the floor" to the opposition if Mutharika insisted on its implementation.

Little Potential for Unrest

18. (C) The DPP primaries caused many bitter personal disputes (ref A), but overall the threat of civil unrest is small in the North. In past elections, there were isolated attacks on Muslims (most of whom are economic migrants from the South) due to a misplaced belief that all Muslims support former President Muluzi. However, the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) in Mzuzu said the group continues to stress religious co-existence and meets regularly with Livingstonia Synod and Catholic leaders. MAM has also embarked on a public education campaign in the North to show that Islam is not a political party in an attempt to further disassociate Muslims from former President Muluzi's United Democratic Front (UDF).

COMMENT: Independents to Profit from DPP

19. (C) The disappointment around Mutharika's selection of Joyce Banda over Goodall Gondwe for his running mate is palpable throughout the North. Harry Mkandawire hinted that if time were not so short, there might have been a full-scale defection from the DPP to form a new Northern Region party. Livingstonia Synod civic educators working in the villages confirmed that the all incumbents will also have a difficult time winning re-election (less than 30% did in 2004) because of the lack of development. While DPP remains the party to beat in many races due to resources, the party's poorly run primaries imposed too many unpopular candidates. Independents appear ready take a plurality, if not a majority, of seats in the region.

110. (C) In the presidential race, Mutharika's aura of invincibility in the North has been cracked. The fact that Rev. Nyondo met John Tembo and admitted to the Ambassador that Tembo has a chance in the North (Tembo received only 3.3% of the vote in the North in 2004) shows the level of frustration with the choices available. In 2004, the

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Livingstonia Synod supported Gwanda Chakuamba, a Southerner who chose a Northern region running mate. Synod support enabled Chakuamba to capture 73% of the votes in the North. Without a Northern running mate, Tembo won't approach that level of support and voter apathy is likely to run high. However, the lack of Synod endorsement for Mutharika should help Tembo, NARC candidate Loveness Gondwe, and independent James Nyondo reach double digit percentages in the North. Moreover, every vote cast their direction will be one that Mutharika originally counted on for his re-election. End Comment.
SULLIVAN